

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT ON 2021/22 – Ian Glyn

The effect of Covid restrictions over the past couple of years meant that we last held a Parish Meeting in September of last year (rather than May).

So my report in May of this year should be delightfully short (covering as it does only 8 months) - and I'll try and make it so!

1.1. PLANNING ISSUES

1.1.1. Planning Applications

12 Planning Applications came before us in the period. On 10 of those, we offered comments of support or “no objection”. Of the two that we objected to, one was withdrawn and re-presented and one remains in the “not at all happy” file. The final decision of the Local Planning Authority supported our judgement in all cases - a fact that is a “first” in my experience of many years as a Councillor and reflects, perhaps, the power of our Neighbourhood Plan which directs several elements of the decision-making process.

1.1.2. Chalgrove Airfield

The position regarding the proposed substantial development at Chalgrove Airfield remains the same as reported in September. We can only imagine that work is continuing behind the scenes to refine the proposal to overcome some of the stated objections. We'll have to wait to see what emerges, but your Council remains opposed to any significant development on the site, on the grounds that it is a completely unsuitable and unsustainable location.

1.1.3. Land north of Fairfield in Roke

This matter has been an issue for several years. Since my report in September last year, the Applicant has appealed SODC's decision to refuse retrospective planning permission for what persists on the site at the moment and also appealed against the enforcement action that SODC has instigated in their commitment to return the land to its previous state.

At the time of writing, no date has been set for the Appeal, but the PC has represented its concerns to the Inspector in writing and intends to do so in person at the Appeal Hearing.

The Parish Councils objections are founded on a number of very specific concerns, and we will focus on those as we make our verbal representations.

1.1.4. Land adjoining The Orchard in Rokemarsh

As I reported in September, your Parish Council has consistently objected to the proposal to build 19 houses on the land adjoining The Orchard in Rokemarsh. During the period, SODC refused this Application. A previous refusal was Appealed by the Applicant, and the proposal was turned down at that Appeal. It remains to be seen whether the recent refusal will be Appealed too.

1.1.5. Permitted development rights

The government have recently introduced the concept of permitted development rights under certain circumstances in the domestic environment. Permitted Development Rights do what they say on the tin so neither the Parish Council or the Local Planning Authority have little (or any) say on the proposed development.

There have been two such Planning Application in the Parish during the period and both have carried with them the baggage of a certain degree of neighbourly controversy and dissatisfaction.

The concept of permitted development rights alters the dynamics facing the Parish Council - it is a concept inspired by central government's desire to simplify the planning system - and it is clearly not without its ramifications in a local environment.

1.1.6. General comment

I finish this section of my report by restating what I said in September in terms that "Your parish Council's decisions re Planning Applications before it is informed and directed by the Berrick Salome Neighbourhood Plan and driven by the belief that homeowners should be permitted to improve and alter their property so long as, by doing so, there is no detriment to the community".

1.2. OTHER MATTERS

1.2.1. Thames Water

There were no incidences of foul water escape from the drains this winter. It remains to be seen whether this was as a result of recent remedial action by Thames Water (to stem ingress during times of high-water table) or whether the winter just gone was especially dry. Meanwhile (and until this matter is clearer) I suspect that Thames Water will stand their efforts in our behalf down.

1.2.2. The expansion of Benson towards Rokemarsh

The start of construction work on the Ben 3/4 development brings home in stark clarity the long-term effect on our Parish of this development. What we have yet to feel is the effect of extra traffic in our lanes as the houses on this site become occupied. But it is clear that the concern that drives the action we have and are taking to mitigate that effect is well founded.

1.2.3. Increasing Traffic Volumes and Speeds

In the context of the above the "traffic group" formed a few years ago under the auspices of the Parish Council have accelerated their activity and significant progress is being made in our effort to keep our lanes safe and pleasantly rural. Importantly, the fact that the politics of OCC has changed recently, with the arrival of a predominant Lib Dem presence, assists us in our quest since OCC are now very much more supportive of a 20-mph speed limit in environments like our Parish than was the previous Council.

Thus, the introduction of a 20-mph limit and the provision of “village gates” are now in progress and it is to be hoped that those initiatives together with other targeted action around the village hall will assist in reducing the speeds in our lanes and discouraging through traffic.

The decisions taken in this regard were canvassed throughout the Parish and a very significant majority of parishioners were in favour of the action being taken.

1.2.4. Tree planting

The trees planted on the recreation ground are starting their life there - thanks to all involved. I understand that a quiet sitting area has been planned into the design and I hope this will be well used.

1.2.5. Gigaclear cabling

The internet outage which we recently suffered (unconnected to any Parish activity) underlines the importance of each and every one of us protecting the integrity of the service by ensuring that no contractors for whom we are responsible unwittingly damage the cabling. I urge all parishioners to remind themselves of the route of the Gigaclear cabling. Details of the cabling can be found on the Parish Council website.

1.2.6. Village Hall

Parishioners will have noted the laying of the hedge outside the village hall and the reconfiguration of the car park entrance. This is stage 1 of the work planned for the village hall to make it a more prominent and attractive element of the street scene with a view to informing passing traffic that they're in the midst of domesticity and should behave accordingly. Improvements to the landscaping of the roadside of the hall are ongoing.

Stage 2 of the improvement to the appearance and layout of the Hall is on hold at the moment pending clarity from the Bridge Club as to their future use of the Hall now that the constraints of Covid are starting to disappear into the history books.

1.2.7. Funding

The Parish Council remains committed to raising sufficient funds through the precept to enable it to undertake maintenance and improvement works within the Parish as required and, particularly, given the evident financial constraints within the District and County Councils. Over recent years the PC has built up reserves to create the ability so to do. In recent months some of these reserves have been expended on activity reported above but the PC remains in a very strong financial position given its likely needs going forward.

A significant reason for the continuing strength of the PC's financial position lies in the fact that a local charity (The Quarry Charity) has been generous in support of our activity, as have both our District and County Councillors via grants offered under their discretion. We are extremely grateful for this assistance.

1.2.8. Revision of Neighbourhood Plan

An important element of the Neighbourhood planning process is that it should be regularly revisited and refreshed to ensure that it is still relevant and useful. We'll need to do that in a year or two but I suggest we leave that particular review to the next Council.

1.2.9. Election 2023

Speaking of which-

Elections will take place in May 2023 for Councillors to stand for the forthcoming 5 years.

2 (? Number) of the current Councillors having served for several years will not be putting their names forward at that election so there is a need for new faces to join the Council.

Quite apart from the need for there to be sufficient Councillors to be quorate - new faces would be extremely welcome as a mechanic for maintaining the freshness of approach of the Council.

So , once again , I urge parishioners to consider acting as Parish Councillors. It's an extremely important and rewarding activity that I commend to all. It's also extremely important that we maintain an active and vigorous Council.

1.2.10. Our clerk

With apologies for repeating this comment so regularly - but you need to know how magnificently the Parish is served by Chris Cussens as our clerk. You will have noticed through your email communications from him the quantum and efficiency of his contribution. What you may not appreciate is the extraordinary work he does in the background to keep the show on the road. He refuses to take the pecuniary reward that is due to him for this service and he deserves a very sincere and enormous vote of thanks.

As do my fellow Councillors who in their various ways represent your interests so professionally and with such resolve, good will and humour.